

**BEFORE THE
POSTAL RATE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC 20268-0001**

**RECEIVED
DEC 27 3 04 PM '02
POSTAL RATE COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY**

Complaint on Removal of Collection Boxes

Docket No. C2003-1

**DOUGLAS F. CARLSON
ANSWER IN OPPOSITION TO POSTAL SERVICE MOTION
FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PROTECTIVE CONDITIONS**

December 24, 2002

On December 20, 2002, the Postal Service filed its answer to my complaint on removal of collection boxes¹ and a motion for the establishment of protective conditions² for disclosure of two pieces of allegedly commercially sensitive Customer Satisfaction Measurement (CSM) data that, the Postal Service suggests, may be “highly germane” to central issues in this proceeding. Answer at 39. Relying almost exclusively on Presiding Officer’s Ruling No. R2001-1/17³ and a Postal Service pleading leading up to that ruling,⁴ the Postal Service requests protective conditions for the CSM data that it wishes to file to aid the Commission in determining whether to hear this complaint.

The Postal Service relies too heavily on POR R2001-1/17. Furthermore, the Postal Service has seriously misjudged the public interest in this matter — or, perhaps more accurately, the public outcry over its conduct that prompted this complaint.

¹ Answer of the United States Postal Service (“Answer”), filed December 20, 2002.

² Motion of the United States Postal Service for the Establishment of Protective Conditions (“Motion”), filed December 20, 2002.

³ POR R2001-1/17, filed December 7, 2001.

⁴ Reply of the United States Postal Service to the Office of the Consumer Advocate’s Response to Motion for Protective Conditions for Results of Consumer Satisfaction Surveys, filed November 26, 2001.

In a public proceeding before the Commission, public disclosure is the default. A proposal for protective conditions is “extraordinary relief that is contrary to the requirement that hearings on postal matters be open and accessible to the public.” POR C2001-1/13 at 6. The burden of establishing that protective conditions are warranted rests squarely on the shoulders of the Postal Service. See POR C2001-1/5 at 6–7.⁵ The Postal Service’s burden is “relatively high.” *Id.* Therefore, even if the Postal Service constructs a plausible scenario under which release of two elements of CSM data could cause competitive harm, the presiding officer nevertheless must weigh the Postal Service’s commercial interests against the strong interest in public disclosure.

While POR R2001-1/17 certainly provides a useful starting point for the analysis, this ruling is far from dispositive of the disclosure issue in the present proceeding. In the discovery dispute that POR R2001-1/17 resolved, the Postal Service was required to produce CSM data in response to more than 60 questions.⁶ Those questions spanned a wide range of issues concerning residential and business mail services. In sharp contrast, in this proceeding the Postal Service apparently proposes to submit CSM data on just two measures, “Ease of Mailing Letters” and “Convenient Location of a Mail Collection Box.” Answer at 21–23. Almost all mail deposited in collection boxes is First-Class Mail, a service over which the Postal Service holds a monopoly. Therefore, the CSM data at issue concern the Postal Service’s performance in providing a monopoly service.

The Postal Service’s motion for protective conditions fails to explain how disclosure of data in response to these two narrow questions concerning deposit of First-Class Mail might inflict competitive harm on the agency. This omission is

⁵ POR C2001-1/5, filed July 18, 2001.

⁶ POR R2001-1/7 directed the Postal Service to provide data in response to 45 questions (including subparts). POR R2001-1/7 at 3, fn. 4, filed November 7, 2001. In addition, information responsive to OCA/USPS-51–57 appears to have resulted in production of data in response to at least 15 more questions (including subparts).

not surprising, as it is hard to imagine how these data, if they fell into the hands of competitors, would permit competitors to lure customers away from low-priced First-Class Mail. Presumably only negative or uncomplimentary data might pose some hypothetical risk of competitive harm, anyway, and public policy would dictate disclosure of such data because the public has a right to know the level and quality of service that the Postal Service is providing. The data in question arguably reflect the performance of an independent establishment of the government in fulfilling its task of providing monopoly service to the nation. As the presiding officer recently held, "When the Government establishes a monopoly, and prevents direct competition, it has some obligation to provide the captive users of the service with sufficient information to enable those users to know what service they are getting." POR C2001-3/23 at 8, filed April 9, 2002 [footnote omitted].

In short, the quantity and scope of CSM data that the Postal Service proposes to provide in this proceeding are substantially smaller than the quantity and scope of CSM data that led to the ruling in POR R2001-1/17. Therefore, while the ruling provides a useful starting point for the present analysis, it does not dictate the outcome.

The other issue that differentiates the current dispute from the circumstances facing the presiding officer in POR R2001-1/17 is the substantial public interest in the removal of collection boxes. Exhibit 1 contains eight newspaper articles⁷ and one opinion piece⁸ on this issue, all expressing deep public concern about the removal of collection boxes. In addition to reflecting public disappointment with the removal of collection boxes, the articles generally reveal a sense of helplessness. At best, members of the public must fight

⁷ *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2002; *USA Today*, March 21, 2002; *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 30, 2002; *Reno Gazette-Journal*, April 8, 2002; *The Oak Ridger Online*, June 28, 2001; *Washington Post*, October 16, 2002; *Bronx Times*, October 17, 2002; and *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 29, 2002.

⁸ *San Jose Mercury News*, 2002 (exact date unknown).

vociferously with postal officials to convince the agency to reverse its unilateral decision to remove a particular collection box. Some customers wrote to their representative in Congress. Answer at 13.

In my assessment, based on years of reading commentary and reporting on postal issues, the removal of collection boxes is invoking more concern, passion, and outrage among postal customers than rate increases. No serious question exists that this complaint addresses a matter of public concern and interest, and the interest arguably is greater than the public interest in disclosure of the data that was the subject of the dispute in POR R2001-1/17. Moreover, as I discuss in my motion for leave to reply to the Postal Service's answer, the Postal Service has rebuffed attempts to obtain data on collection-box locations, posted collection times on collection boxes, and volume data from collection boxes that have been removed from service.⁹ The Commission is the public's last line of defense on service issues. As the Commission observed after a failed attempt by the Postal Service to dismiss a previous service complaint without a hearing, a service complaint is "the avenue Congress provided for individuals to request the Commission to address an alleged problem with a Postal Service rate or service." Order No. 1312 at 2, filed May 7, 2001.

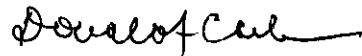
Finally, as the Postal Service observes, disclosure of the CSM data is voluntary. Neither I nor the Commission has requested production of the data through discovery. The Postal Service would like the Commission to consider these data because the Postal Service believes that the data will strengthen its wish to have this complaint dismissed without a hearing. The Postal Service has made a choice. However, this proceeding is a public proceeding evaluating a government agency's provision of a monopoly service. The default is public disclosure of data. The Postal Service has failed to show how information on some customers' perceptions of the ease of mailing letters and the convenience

⁹ Douglas F. Carlson Motion for Leave to Reply to Postal Service Answer to Complaint at 5, dated December 24, 2002.

of locations of collection boxes would cause competitive harm in the monopoly market of First-Class Mail. The Postal Service is free to withhold the CSM data altogether at this point in the proceeding. However, if the Postal Service chooses to file the data, the Postal Service must accept public access to the data.

For the reasons explained herein, the Commission should deny the Postal Service's motion for protective conditions.

Respectfully submitted,



Dated: December 24, 2002

DOUGLAS F. CARLSON

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that I have this day served the foregoing document upon the required parties in accordance with section 12 of the *Rules of Practice*.



DOUGLAS F. CARLSON

December 24, 2002
Santa Cruz, California

EXHIBIT 1

Hundreds of mailboxes returned to sender

Post office plucking those with least letters

By Joe Garofoli

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Nancy Dutcher wants to mail her holiday greeting cards in her neighborhood mailbox, just as she's done for the past 63 years. But her mailbox has gone the way of the Pony Express.

Like hundreds of other U.S. Postal Service collection boxes around the Bay Area, Dutcher's blue neighborhood box in North Oakland has been yanked, recycled and special-delivered to mailbox heaven — a victim of international terrorism, the changing culture and Postal Service budget problems.

"They raise our rates, and then they take our mailboxes," Dutcher said. "When I called to complain, they said it would improve our service. Well, how can it when I have to walk further to get to the mailbox?"

Dutcher isn't alone in her mailbox envy.

More than a third of the boxes in two of the densest San Jose-area ZIP codes have been removed since 2000, and 450 have disappeared from the Oakland district since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, according to Postal Service officials. San Francisco has lost only 28 boxes over the same period.

► **MAILBOXES:** Page A21 Col. 3

Terror, budget prompt post office to thin ranks

► MAILBOXES

From Page 1

but that followed a two-year stretch in which the Postal Service pulled about 100 mailboxes.

The exodus intensified after Sept. 11 and the ensuing fears about anthrax-laced packages. Fearing that a remote mailbox "without a lot of eyes on it" could be attractive to terrorists, San Jose district spokesman Gus Ruiz said, officials started taking a harder look at which boxes they needed.

The Postal Service's rule: If a box receives fewer than 25 pieces of mail a day, it gets a first-class ride to the recycling bin.

Over the past two years, 514 mailboxes have been removed from San Jose ZIP codes beginning with the prefixes 950- and 951-, Ruiz said.

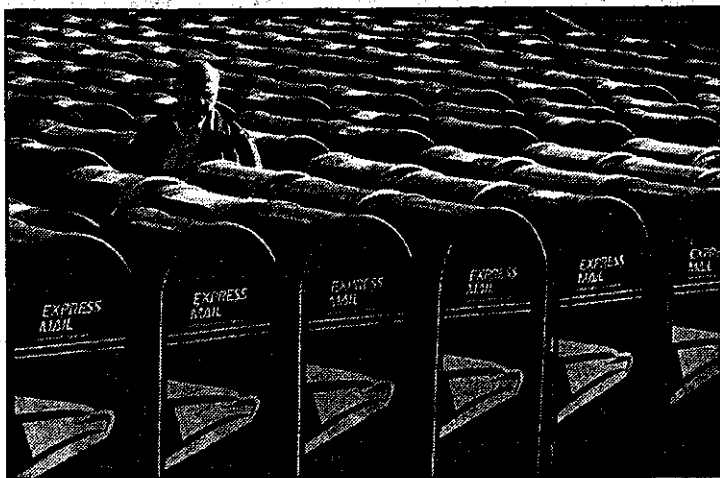
That leaves 850 boxes in one of the region's most densely populated mail zones. The Postal Service has not installed any new boxes, even though the zone has added 3,240 new addresses over the past year.

Streamlining

"This allows us to streamline our collection process," Ruiz said. "If a letter carrier doesn't have to stop at a collection box with only two or three letters, then they can move quicker along on their route."

A main reason for streamlining: The Postal Service has lost nearly \$3 billion over the past two years, frozen construction and cut 12,000 jobs.

Throw in the cost of new security procedures to deal with the post-anthrax world, and a vehicle fleet that gobbles up another \$3 million every time the price of gasoline goes up 1 cent, and Americans have an explanation for three increases in the price of



PAUL CHINN / The Chronicle

Post office spokesman Gus Ruiz strolls through the graveyard of mailboxes taken out of circulation behind a San Jose post office.

stamps over the past three years — and the reduction in the number of mailboxes.

Or do they?

The Postal Service "is using everybody's concerns about security to reduce their costs," said Rick Merritt, executive director of PostalWatch, a Virginia-based watchdog organization. "But all they're really doing is hastening their own irrelevancy."

Irrelevancy may be a bit further down the road, considering that mail volume in San Francisco and Oakland is approaching its level of two years ago after dropping 2 percent last year, according to Postal Service spokesman Horace Hinshaw.

The San Jose district is expected to see a 1 percent increase this year. That's not bad, but it's still down from the annual 5 percent increases during Silicon Valley's glory years, when friends and family mailed each other stock options and plane tickets to Aruba.

Symbol of normalcy

And while the daily sight of

letter carriers on their rounds was a stabilizing symbol of normalcy in the jittery days after Sept. 11, few deny that there's a cultural change happening on the nation's mail routes — changes that could someday make a walk to the corner mailbox seem as antiquated as pulling milk out of the icebox.

Hinshaw said that with more people working outside the home, more people are mailing their letters at their workplaces.

And housing developers are rethinking where they install mailboxes. Ruiz said many new tracts in the South Bay have "cluster boxes," giant banks of mailboxes in a central location. Such one-stop pickup spots make life easier for the letter-carrier — and end the need for a neighborhood mailbox.

Then there's the Internet, which the Postal Service expects to gobble up to 4 percent of its first-class mail volume in each of the next five years, potentially slashing its revenue 17 percent.

An increasing number of peo-

ple are sending greeting cards and invitations online. Eyite, one of the largest online invitation sites, had 1.9 million visitors in October, according to Lisa Strand, chief analyst for Milpitas-based Nielsen//NetRatings.

Electronic greeting card sites had 33 million visitors last December, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

More bad news for mailboxes: Many electronic greeters were women over 55. These pillars of the corner mailbox generation were 1½ times as likely as any other age group to visit an Internet greeting card site. "That breaks the notion that greeting card sites are for the young and hip," Strand said.

Petition to get box back

Tell that to Marv Tripp, who has mailed his letters in the same Oakland mailbox near his home since 1956. Two months ago, he saw his beloved foot-high, cast-iron box and a full-size one located nearby carted off in a pickup truck with others bound for the scrap heap.

Tripp was infuriated. The retiree would have to drive to the closest post office for every little thing. He doesn't pay bills or buy greeting cards online.

So he gathered close to 200 signatures on a petition and presented it to his local postmaster. Within weeks, one of the two mailboxes returned.

"You have to plan so many things in your life," Tripp said. "You don't want to plan your life around mailing a letter."

If you have a question about a mailbox, contact your local postmaster by calling (800) 275-8777 or log on to www.usps.com.

E-mail Joe Garofoli at jgarofoli@sfgchronicle.com.

Bronx Times

Weather
in the
Bronx

For local news delivery
email enter address h

News

Police Blotter
Community
Calendar
Letters
Boroughwide
News
School News
Sports
Throggs Neck
Front Page
Morris Park
Front Page
Feature Story
Archive
Contact Us
Advertising
Save My Card
Classified Order
Subscription
Order

Search Archive



Copyright©2002
Bronx Times
Reporter, Inc.
All Rights Reserve

E-Mail Us



Boroughwide News

10461, 10462 mailbox removals come as a surprise by Sondra Levin

The U.S. Postal Service is reducing the number of mailboxes nationally, based on whether the collection boxes have a low volume of mail. The Bronx is scheduled to lose nearly 50 mailboxes, with about 1,000 remaining.

In a letter to the Bronx postmaster, Congressman Joseph Crowley criticized the closing of the collection boxes, saying that it is unfair to residents, especially senior citizens.

Community boards 10 and 11 recently lost 10 mailboxes, mainly in Pelham Bay, but also in the areas of Westchester Square and Morris Park. After CB 10 heard about the closings from residents, the Postal Service responded to a request from the board, and sent an October 9 memo listing boxes that were closed.

James Vacca, district manager of CB 10, said that mailboxes were removed without consultation with the community board and elected leaders. The way community leaders found out about the missing mailboxes was that residents started calling the community board, complaining about the loss of boxes. Vacca initially thought that the mailboxes were not working or had been vandalized before he found out what actually happened. "I think the post office made an error in not contacting the community first," Vacca said. "We need an explanation location-by-location."

The Postal Service told the community board office that the mailboxes were underutilized. Vacca pointed out that the mailbox removed at 3255 Westchester Avenue, in Pelham Bay, is near the train station, where many people come and go. Vacca added that the mailbox at Hershall and Butler places, in Pelham Bay, might be considered isolated by the postal service, but elderly people use it.

October 17, 2002

More Boroughwide News Headlines

Youth in coma
after elevator
plunge at
Truman H.S.

Gloria Wise
plans
25th
anniversary

Computers for
early learning

Community
garden
agreement
protects most
green spaces

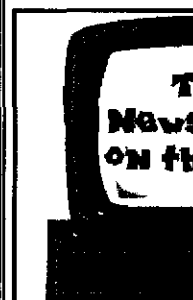
Cassano
thanked for
his
contributions
to Bronx
YMCA

Photo

Montefiore
officially
inaugurates
Centennial
Women's
Center

Cassano

Click at
for large



System and Me
Ads have a P
Click Here for N

While Vacca said that the community is awaiting further explanation from the post office, the initial reaction is negative. "I don't know what the big deal is in leaving mailboxes open," Vacca said. "The number of closings was surprising. I want to know if the Postal Service is doing this in suburbia where thousands of mailboxes are at isolated locations on streets with two or three houses."

Pat McGovern, a spokesperson for the U.S. Postal Service, said that after the World Trade Center disaster, the postal system had to remove a number of mailboxes in the downtown area because of damage or security reasons. The Postal Service then began looking to remove other mailboxes based on security and low volume issues, and this led to a nationwide move to close collection boxes with low volume to save time and money. She said that the Postal Service is closing mailboxes that average 25 pieces of mail or less a day.

The decision to close mailboxes undergoes an internal review process in the U.S. Postal Service, but the Postal Service usually doesn't send out notices to the public when it closes mailboxes, according to McGovern.

She said that residents who lost nearby mailboxes still have the options of leaving their outgoing mail in their home mailboxes or giving it to their regular postal carrier. She said that carriers are trained to accept outgoing mail and put it in a separate area of their pouch.

McGovern said that one of the reasons that the U.S. Postal Service decided to close mailboxes with low volume was that officials noticed that many people bring their mail into work to be mailed or drop their mail off in collection boxes on the way to work.

The following mailboxes were closed in zip code 10461, which includes Westchester Square, Pelham Bay and part of Morris Park: 3255 Westchester Avenue; 2901 Bruckner Boulevard; 3020 E. Tremont Avenue; Hershall and Butler places; Jarvis Avenue; Overing Street; 2801 Middletown Road and Westchester Avenue; and Mulford and Laurie places.

In area code 10462, which includes Parkchester and Morris Park, a mailbox was closed at 1800 Matthews Avenue in Morris Park.

thanked for his contributions to the Bronx YMCA

CB 10 offers solution to Brush Ave. truck parking

St. Ben's Mass for new moms, dads

Halloween safety tips from 45th

NYC's Operation Dumpster rids sidewalks of business refuse

Crowley delivers \$1.3 million to Bronx hospital affected by 9-11

10461, 10462 mailbox removals come as a surprise

Manhattan College celebrates 150 years at library dedication

TV tune up

Outlandish characters

washingtonpost.com

USPS Finds Trouble At Drop of a Letter

Agency Meets Opposition to Efforts To Remove Mailboxes, Mail Chutes

By Hanna Rosin
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, October 16, 2002; Page A23

A concrete stump in Bethesda where a mailbox used to be now stands as a monument to a new kind of residential rage: "Where's my mail?" someone spray-painted on it.

This "open letter" is aimed at the U.S. Postal Service, which in the past two months has been removing hundreds of mailboxes and mail chutes from street corners and buildings in the D.C. area, Chicago, New Orleans, Denver, South Bend, Ind., and dozens of other cities.

For the Postal Service, the campaign is about "ensuring the security and safety of the mail, and doing everything possible to save money," said Deborah Yackley, USPS spokeswoman for the Capital District.

The Postal Service had been struggling with its finances even before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the anthrax mailings put additional strains on the agency. Consolidating pickup routes saves money, and fewer boxes and no more chutes mean more control should the Postal Service decide to install devices to detect bombs or biological agents, Yackley said.

But it turns out the corner mailbox is a sort of neighborhood icon, with the same emotional resonance as the sandstone local firehouse. It may not get enough use by some official standard, but that doesn't mean residents are not fiercely attached to it.

In nearly every city where boxes have been removed, the neighbors have fought back, with petitions and protests and angry graffiti. And in nearly every case, the local post office has caved at least a little, discovering sudden problems in its auditing system and putting some of the boxes back.

In the Washington area, the removal program was put on hold about a month ago after citizens of Bethesda and Silver Spring loudly complained. Now the Postal Service is considering whether to put some of those boxes back.

"What we discovered," said Yackley, "is that people really like their mailboxes."

The Postal Service began its campaign a year and a half ago, after a General Accounting Office report suggested it remove underused mailboxes to enhance "security and efficiency." A national audit targeted mailboxes around the country that received fewer than 25 pieces of mail a day.

But the campaign to remove them only began in earnest after Sept. 11, when mailboxes in very conspicuous places began to seem like security hazards.

In downtown Washington, the Postal Service removed about 20 boxes outside prominent government buildings. In Chicago, at the prompting of the city's 911 emergency services, the USPS removed a quarter of the 300 mailboxes around the downtown Sears Tower area, said Judy Winiarz, USPS spokeswoman for the Chicago area.

The security concerns are not based on a specific scenario; it's difficult to rig a homemade bomb that

doesn't explode when dropped into a mailbox, said Winiarz. But should someone rig such a bomb or drop anthrax into the mailboxes, the Postal Service wants to have "tighter control over the whole operation."

Next the Postal Service targeted chutes inside buildings. "Chutes are beautiful and have nostalgic value, but mail can get stuck in them, or we don't have 24-hour access," said Yackley. "And we don't own most of the chutes."

In most places where the Postal Service closed building chutes, it replaced them with an outside mailbox. But still the agency encountered resistance, not so much from businesses as from neighborhood apartment buildings where elderly or disabled people lived.

Dave Lilling noticed the letter posted in September in the Blair Apartments in Silver Spring where he lives, announcing that collection points located inside the building would be moved outside. The building has a 24-hour doorman and many of his neighbors are older people in wheelchairs, so Lilling organized the building residents to sign a petition. "If they can collect from a little box in a private home, they can collect from a big building," he said. But the post office still hasn't reopened the chute.

A similar thing happened in South Bend at the St. Joseph's Tower apartments. Most of the 92 residents signed a petition explaining that they were handicapped and not very mobile, and used the box for paying bills and returning library books and tapes for the blind.

Where the Postal Service really met resistance was when it targeted those familiar blue boxes in residential neighborhoods.

In South Bend, the USPS placed removal notices on about a fourth of the city's 275 mailboxes. But after a complaint line was flooded with calls, South Bend Postmaster Larry Dauby discovered a "glitch" in the program and temporarily halted it. In Chicago, postal officials met with neighborhood aldermen and halved the number of boxes targeted for removal from 80 to 40, said Winiarz.

Maryland residents balked as well. The Postal Service removed about a third of the 700 mailboxes in the Bethesda and Silver Spring area.

Dale Morrison organized a phone lobby among Bethesda residents to try to get "at least one" of the mailboxes back.

"They raise the rates 17 percent and cut the service," said Linda Greenhouse of Bethesda. "Now you have to get in your car to mail a letter."

For Bill Schaefer of Bethesda this was the clearest sign that mail delivery is moving away from being a universal service that is part of the American landscape, like the highways, and toward becoming something specialized.

"What I really feel bad about," he said, "is no matter how much we have e-mail and FedEx and bulk mail, the Postal Service should be accessible for everybody."

"It makes no sense," said John Nelson of the Westmoreland Citizens Association in Bethesda. "I can see they're worried about security downtown, but here?"

For now, the local program is on hold, with no immediate plans to resume.

AREA NEWS

 E-mail to a friend

Story last updated at 11:34 a.m. on Thursday, June 28, 2001

Merchants upset that collection boxes removed

by Beverly Majors
Oak Ridger staff

The U.S. Postal Service in Oak Ridge recently removed five collection boxes from around the city, causing merchants at the Grove Center shopping center to ask why.

Most of the Grove Center merchants wrote a letter to U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp, R-3rd District, asking him to address their concerns about the removal of the collection box and its impact on customers and merchants in Grove Center.

The letter states that the box served 10 to 15 businesses and that the removal has caused resentment and a loss of man hours.

It also states that because the box was removed, small-business merchants in Grove Center are put at a disadvantage because someone has to take off work and in some cases close the business for awhile so he or she can personally take mail to the post office.

Postmaster Frank P. Chmielewicz said the five boxes were removed from several areas around the city because the boxes did not generate enough volume of mail to merit pickup.

Chmielewicz said he does not understand the merchants' complaint because a carrier takes mail to the businesses and also picks up mail at the businesses.

"The level of service is staying the same," he said.

The decision to remove the boxes came after auditors inspected the volume of mail in collection boxes throughout the city. Those boxes with a volume of less than 100 pieces per day were removed.

Oak Ridge currently has collection boxes in 29 locations and more than one box at four of those locations.



A motorist drops off letters in one of the four mail collection boxes at the Oak Ridge post office.

-- Staff photo by Marie Moffitt

Advertising Information

"A box should be within one mile of anyone," Chmielewicz said.

Glen Patterson, Pattersons Appliances, said a postal worker picked up mail from the box at noon each day and the auditors checked the box about 5 p.m. when it had already been emptied once.

He also said the box was convenient to Grove Center customers.

"I don't feel comfortable taking customers' mail," he said. Sometimes a merchant will add a customer's mail to the outgoing mail at the business.

Chmielewicz said collection boxes are currently in place at the following locations:

108 Administration Road (six boxes; this is the main post office location).

301 S. Tulane Ave. (four boxes; this is the post office process center).

98 Arkansas Ave. (Weigel's).

301 Briarcliff Ave. (British Woods apartments).

1093 Commerce Park.

100 Elmhurst Drive (Briarcliff Health Care Center).

697 Emory Valley Road (Briarcliff Square Shopping Center).

99 Grandcove Lane.

2010 state Highway 58 (East Tennessee Technology Park).

350 N. Illinois Ave. (Anderson's Hilltop Market).

380 S. Illinois Ave. (Kroger).

704 S. Illinois Ave. (Pine Ridge office complex).

200 Manhattan Ave. (Woodland Park Baptist Church).

305 New York Ave. (Pine Valley Shopping Center).

200 New York Ave. (Westmall Medical Park).

9133 Oak Ridge Highway (Solway).

600 Oak Ridge Turnpike.

870 Oak Ridge Turnpike.

901 Oak Ridge Turnpike (Tunnell Building).

988 Oak Ridge Turnpike (two boxes, Physician's Plaza).

1188 Oak Ridge Turnpike (two boxes, SunTrust Bank).

1195 Oak Ridge Turnpike (Manhattan Plaza).

1980 Oak Ridge Turnpike (Four Oaks Center).

1990 Oak Ridge Turnpike (Copy-Rite, Westside Plaza).

43 E. Tennessee Ave. (three boxes, Jackson Square).

370 E. Tennessee Ave. (Elm Grove Shopping Center).

700 W. Vanderbilt Drive.

100 Villanova Road.

Oak Ridger
Online



All Contents ©Copyright *The Oak Ridger*

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

RGJ.com

HOME / NEWS

HAPPY HOLIDAYS From The Builders



Search

NEW Two

December 23, 2002

NEWS ENTERTAINMENT RENO TAHOE VISITOR'S GUIDE

PLACE AN AD

COMPLETE FORECAST

☐ Make RGJ my homepage
 ☐ One Month Free Subscription!

HOMES & REAL ESTATE JOBS

Current Temp **23°**

- ▶ Classified Search
- ▶ Place an Ad

Local News
Weather
Obituaries
Nation/World
Sports
Entertainment
Business
Technology
Life
Outdoors
Opinion
Columnists
Forums
TV Guide
Movie Listings
Special Reports
Coupons
Weddings & Announcements
Wedding Planner

What's in the News

- ▶ Breaking News
- ▶ Morning Briefing
- ▶ Reno Tahoe Fun

Sign Up

Customer Help Desk

- ▶ Customer Help
- ▶ Advertise with us
- ▶ Place classified ad
- ▶ Contact Us
- ▶ Literacy Outreach
- ▶ Subscribe
- ▶ Renew

- ▶ Send us a news tip
- ▶ Letter to the editor
- ▶ Jobs at the RGJ

Promotions

- ▶ WIN a Lake Tahoe Honeymoon!
- ▶ Great RGJ.com Giveaways
- ▶ Join a Focus Group
- ▶ Valuable RGJ.com Coupons

US WEEKEND
2002 Photo Gallery
CLICK

Look for USA

Reno postal service flawed

Postmaster admits noncompliance: In addition to violations, RGJ probe finds less local access to service

Frank X. Mullen Jr.
RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
4/8/2002 06:13 pm

As the U.S. Postal Service prepares to increase the price of a first-class stamp to 37 cents, Reno residents are getting less customer service from the Reno Post Office than four years ago, a Reno Gazette-Journal investigation shows.

The probe uncovered several deficiencies, including slower delivery and many violations of national regulations governing street mail collection boxes.

When confronted with the evidence, the Reno Post Office admitted it was ignoring national standards and said it would check all 175 mailboxes in Reno and make changes to conform with regulations.

"My intent is to get within the rules and regulations," said Reno Postmaster Jack Wilkins. "We will run tests on all our collection boxes and make whatever changes are needed to meet national standards."

He said the mailbox tests to determine how much mail they get each day began last week after the Reno Gazette-Journal asked postal officials to comment on the results of its probe.



David B. Parker/RGJ
A U.S. Postal Service employee unloads a mailbox in downtown Reno Thursday afternoon.

Other Stories

- ▶ List of U.S. mailboxes in the city of Reno
- ▶ Text of Nevada's law against hazing
- ▶ UNR students focus on campus death, debate fraternities
- ▶ Authorities investigate UNR student drowning

Related Links

- ▶ Postal Service on the Web
- ▶ Postal Watch on the Web
- ▶ Postal Workers Website
- ▶ Main Street Coalition for Postal Fairness
- ▶ USPS Post Office Locator
- ▶ Postal Regulations

➔ [E-Mail This Article](#)

🖨️ [Printer-Friendly Version](#)

📄 [Subscribe to the paper online](#)

Rick Merritt, executive director of PostalWatch, a consumer advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. said Reno's problems are similar to what's happening in other cities, particularly in the West.

"Service in the West seems to be declining faster than service in the rest of the country and the delivery standards put in last year show that."

The newspaper's investigation found:

- o The Reno Post Office is in violation of several national USPS standards for collecting mail from street mailboxes. Regulations require mail in high-volume



theClassFINDS
Don't know what to do?

Local Real Estate

The web's most comprehensive source for buying real estate!



Find a Car

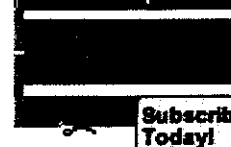
- ▶ 2003 Car Buyers Guide
- ▶ View your used car's history



JobsTV



RGJ Subscription



WEEKEND EVERY
Sunday in the Reno
Gazette-Journal

street boxes to be picked up no earlier than 5 p.m., but some of the city's most-used mailboxes list pickup times as early as 2 p.m. About one-third of local mailboxes have no Saturday mail pickups, another violation of Postal Service rules.

o Some of Reno's street mailboxes have been removed from residential areas, inconveniencing customers, and Reno postal officials may remove more low-volume boxes this year. But officials won't say how many boxes have been eliminated or when they were removed.

Wilkins said the locations and pickup times of Reno's 175 blue street/mail mailboxes also are not public information and refused to provide a list of collection points. The newspaper then located 92 mailboxes in Reno in order to check them against regulations.

o Reno, with six post offices, has only one post office offering Saturday window service and then only until 1 p.m. A check of 24 cities about the size of Reno showed that those cities had a maximum of five and a minimum of two post offices open on Saturday and many were open until 5 p.m.

Reno postal officials said enough Saturday service is provided in the city's four contract stations, which are located within businesses. But residents and critics complained that the contract stations don't offer vital services available at post offices, such as the ability to provide tracking codes for registered or certified mail.

o In a controversial move last year, the Postal Service realigned its Western delivery zones. For example, a letter mailed from Reno to Las Vegas, Battle Mountain or Los Angeles should arrive within three days as compared to the former two-day standard. However, an analysis of how those new postal zones are applied show some two-day zone mail is sent by air to three-day areas and then sent by truck to a two-day zone. The consumer advocate who did the study of mail shipments from Reno to California said the new zones and delivery standards are arbitrary and illogical.

o Postal officials concede that Reno's information provided to an automated telephone service for customers to locate mail drop-off boxes is inaccurate and outdated.

Reno postal officials said they have done their best to provide services in a rapidly-growing area. The city's postal services are a \$20 million to \$25 million per year operation, with 350 employees and 82,000 mail delivery points, officials said.

The Reno Post Office handles about 2 million pieces of mail each day, Wilkins said.

"I think we have done a good job of maintaining service in Reno," he said. "Even with the growth in population and a decrease in mail volume nationwide, service has remained steady."

But the Reno Gazette-Journal's investigation found that residents have less access to mail service than they did four years ago, despite postal regulations that guarantee national standards for mail collections.

Ignoring postal regulations

In June 1999, Reno postal officials set earlier pickup times on most of the city's public mailboxes, according to an examination of the labels on 92 of those boxes.

Although regulations in the national Postal Operations Manual say high-volume mailboxes — those that handle 100 pieces of mail or more — must have pickup times no earlier than 5 p.m., many high-volume mailboxes have pickup times as early as 1:30 p.m.

Two high-volume mailboxes on the corner of Virginia and Second streets list a pickup time of 2 p.m., three hours before the mandatory USPS deadline. Some mailboxes located outside post offices list a last collection time of 4:45 p.m., shaving 15 minutes off the federal standard.

Other boxes showed weekday pickup times from 11:45 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.

Wilkins initially said the 5 p.m. standard wasn't mandatory, but later he acknowledged that many Reno mailboxes — such as the two boxes at Second and Virginia streets — violate postal standards.

He declined to say how many others don't meet standards.

"That's what we'll have to find out by running the tests on the boxes," Wilkins said. "We need current data to make decisions and see what we have to do differently."

"We may have to change collection times or add or even remove low-volume boxes."

In addition, postal regulations and memos from USPS headquarters make Saturday mailbox pickups mandatory, as long as the mailbox is available to the public on Saturdays.

In Reno, a few boxes within office buildings aren't accessible on Saturdays, but most of the boxes which have no Saturday collections are in locations that are accessible to the public on weekends.

One-third of the 92 boxes located by the Gazette-Journal had no Saturday pickups.

Ignoring mailbox regulations has been a problem in other cities and those post offices had to reinstate later collection hours.

In 1999 in Berkeley, Walnut Creek and Lafayette, Calif., postal officials admitted they were in violation of federal standards by creating earlier mailbox collection times the year before. The officials switched 110 mailboxes from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. pickup times in those communities to comply with federal rules.

Officials said they changed delivery times in order to process mail earlier and said there was no intent to violate rules.

Postal Service critics said field offices often violate regulations to meet out-of-town delivery standards.

"When you pick up the mail earlier, you increase your overnight delivery scores," said Douglas F. Carlson, who fought to have the collection times changed back to 5 p.m. in the three California cities. "Postal managers get bonuses if they meet overnight delivery standards. That's why the regulations for mailbox pickups are frequently ignored."

Carlson is a law school graduate and an assistant dean at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He participates frequently in postal rate-making proceedings at the Postal Rate Commission as a citizen intervenor.

"There is a major drive on the part of postal managers to improve those delivery scores and Reno has improved its scores," he said. "So the postal officials can claim they have improved delivery, but they do it by picking up the contents of mailboxes earlier than allowed and that gives them more time to process mail to meet their dispatches."

Carlson said the Santa Cruz, Calif., post office recently turned back the clock on its mailbox pickup times and business patrons complained about the lack of late afternoon collections.

"The improvement in overnight delivery is there, but it's done at the expense of customers on the other end," he said. "It's not done for the customers, it's a benefit for the postal managers."

Postal officials in both the California and Reno mailbox collection cases said Carlson's allegations are unfair and untrue. They said bonuses are based on districtwide performances and not solely on meeting overnight delivery goals.

The vanishing mailboxes

There are about 326,000 street boxes in the U.S., handling about one-fifth of the annual burden of 207 billion pieces of mail. Those boxes are disappearing by the day.

In Reno, postal officials initially said 12 mailboxes were removed in the last three years and three were added in new subdivisions. But they refused to identify the locations where boxes were removed.

Wilkins said the Reno office this year may remove more mailboxes that average less than 25 pieces of mail per day.

Several Reno mailboxes found by the newspaper were clumped together on cross streets. For example, there are four mailboxes within a half block of each other at Kirman and Kuenzli streets. In other parts of the city — the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony and Hidden Valley, for example — collection boxes can't be found.

Postal patrons said there should be more mailboxes, not fewer.

Sandy Montoya, a Reno resident, said she was inconvenienced when postal workers removed a mailbox at the corner of Denslowe Street and Valley Road a few years ago.

"I didn't know how much I depended on it until they took it away," she said. "Even weeks after it was taken out, I would put the mail in my pocket knowing that I'd be passing the box. But the box wasn't there anymore."

"There used to be one on Keystone and a few other locations I passed by on the way to work but they are gone now. It's like a treasure hunt to find one."

She now drops off mail at the University Station Post Office, but that's about a mile out of her way, she said.

"When I was a kid there seemed to be a mailbox on every corner," Montoya said. "Now try to find one. They are like an endangered species."

The boxes are getting scarcer across the nation, according to the Postal Service.

Since 1999, USPS has removed 20,726 collection boxes from streets nationwide. The postal service has removed about 2 percent of the boxes each year, but is expected to double that amount this year, according to postal officials in Washington, D.C.

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the USPS has removed 7,000 mailboxes in a dozen cities for security reasons. Most were in front of public buildings, USPS officials said.

The Postal Service maintains a toll-free number that allows people nationwide to find out the closest mailbox to their home or business addresses: 1-800-ASKUSPS. In one instance, a postal employee referred a Reno caller to a box that was removed 18 months ago.

"The Reno database is not up to date," Wilkins admitted. "But we'll get it up to date. We'll get it current."

Less service on Saturday

In the paper's survey of 24 similar-sized cities, Reno had the most post office stations but was the only city with just one open for Saturday service.

Reno has six post offices open on weekdays, but the 24 other cities each had five post offices open on weekdays, according to the USPS Web site.

Of the 24 cities, 11 had five post offices with Saturday hours, six had four post offices open on Saturday, six had three post offices open, and one had two post offices with Saturday hours.

Desnie Czipka, a former Reno Post Office official, said the decision to keep offices open on Saturday is made by regional managers. She said the four Reno contract stations located in Reno businesses are adequate to serve the public. She said the contract stations can do almost everything a regular post office can do.

"You can't pay for post office boxes there, or get passport forms, but you can send certified or registered mail," she said.

That's true, but the certified and registered mail sent from at least one contract station in Reno can't be tracked like mail sent from post offices.

Susanna Money-Doster, who owns the Birkenstock store in the Reno Town Mall, said she found out that the hard way.

On March 15 she mailed plane tickets to her son in the Air Force in Minnesota via certified mail. When the tickets failed to arrive in a few days and her certified mail card was returned to her unsigned, she asked employees at the contract station to trace the letter.

"They told me they couldn't do anything because they don't have the equipment to put barcodes on certified mail and that's how the mail is tracked," Money-Doster said. "They told me to call the 800 phone number for help. I called and after a half-hour wait on hold, the person told me to go to the Reno Main Post Office for help."

But the clerks there couldn't do anything either because the certified letter had no tracking code. On March 22, Money-Doster's son called to say the tickets had arrived but so far the Postal Service hasn't contacted her about her lost mail report.

"I use the Video Plus contract station for my business and the people there are great," she said. "There's nothing wrong with the people, but there is something wrong with the system."

"You think you are at a post office, but you aren't. They should put signs up at satellite stations that they can't process the mail the same way post offices do. Now, if I want to buy stamps or mail a card, I'll go to the contract station. But for anything else, I'll drive to a post office."

A check of the city's four contract stations for hours and services found that two failed to mention their Saturday hours. And the clerks at all the stations weren't sure what services offered at the regular post offices weren't offered at contract stations.

A confusion of zones

Last year, without public notice, the Postal Service eliminated two-day mail service for most Western states, including mail between Reno/Carson City and Las Vegas, and between northern Nevada and many cities in California.

An estimated 1.5 billion pieces of mail per year — most of it west of the Rocky Mountains — is subject to the lower standards, according to the USPS.

Postal officials blamed the unreliability of air cargo, which they said forced the Postal Service to shrink two-day delivery zones into "more logical" delivery areas that can be served by trucks. They said the mail wasn't getting slower, the standards were changed to reflect the speed at which it traveled anyway.

"We brought service standards into the realm of reality," said Teresa Rudkin, Postal Service spokeswoman in Denver.

But critics said the new zones don't make sense because the Postal Service is still using a mix of air and truck transport to reach the same destinations.

Carlson analyzed the transportation of mail between Reno and California and found that some mail is flown to central Los Angeles to be processed and is then sent by truck to the Los Angeles suburbs, which is designated a two-day delivery zone from Reno.

He said while it would make sense to fly mail from Carson City and Reno to Las Vegas because there is a demand for faster service between the two Nevada cities, Las Vegas is a three-day destination because it's more than 12 hours away by truck.

"The needs of customers are not a factor in the 12-hour driving standard," Carlson said. "They said the reason for the change was the unreliability of air service and then they wind up using aircraft to get the mail to central Los Angeles, sort it and

get it to the two-day destinations in the LA suburbs.

"It defies common sense, but that's the post office."

John Gurley of Battle Mountain, a retired mail carrier and sorter, said he's amazed when mail sent to him from Sacramento is flown to Salt Lake City, sorted, and then brought by truck to Battle Mountain.

"From what I've seen over the years, there's definitely been a huge decrease in delivery service," said Gurley, who worked for the Postal Service from 1956 to 1989. "In the 1960s, service was the big thing but about 1966 the pattern we're in today started. They raised rates and the service started getting worse."

He said he blames the Postal Service's problems on an increase in managers.

"You've got a boss of this and a boss of that and there's no real work for them to do," he said. "That's where the cuts should come. Get rid of all those managers who can't justify their jobs."

USPS in a "death spiral"

The General Accounting Office has labeled the postal system "at risk," and Postmaster General John Potter projects a deficit of \$2 billion to \$3 billion for 2003.

Following a 3-cent rate increase expected this summer, the cost of sending a letter won't go up again for at least two years, Potter said last week Friday. The postal governing board is expected to give final approval this week to an increase boosting first-class stamps to 37 cents this summer.

Meanwhile, Potter detailed a transformation plan sent a plan to Congress on Thursday last week that proposes major changes in the operation of the agency. While waiting for Congress to consider its proposals, Potter said the post office will take what steps it can to cut costs and improve efficiency.

As part of that, he said announced, the Postal Service is ending its self-imposed moratorium on closing small post offices. The agency will also be consolidating some of the 400 processing centers it operates across the country, he said.

In Reno, officials said they may eliminate some low volume mailboxes receiving less than 25 pieces of mail per day and look for other ways to cut costs.

Merritt, of executive director of PostalWatch, a consumer advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. said cutbacks usually mean less service to the public.

"The systematic reduction in the number of mailboxes translates into less service to the American people," he said. "When they do things to get costs under control they reduce service and drive more people away from using the service."

The post office delivers 689 million pieces of mail per day, and letter carriers each haul 42 tons per year. A 2001 USPS survey showed that 98 percent of Americans continue to pay their bills by mail. But as service continues to decline, more people will find alternatives to the mail, Merritt said.

"There's a backlash as more and more people mail their bills on time but get hit with late fees when the post office doesn't deliver them on time," he said. "With electronic bill payment becoming more common mail volumes will continue to decrease and the Postal Service's death spiral will accelerate."

He said the problems in Reno are similar to what's happening in other cities.

"There was a big hoopla in Houston about picking up mail later in the day and all over the country mailboxes are vanishing and people are being forced to move their home mailbox closer to the post offices with the gang boxes that are being put in," Merritt said.

He said as the post office makes its service less convenient and takes advantage of the terror issue to remove mailboxes and increase the secrecy of its operations, more people are being driven away from their reliance on the service.

"The Postal Service is its own worst enemy," he said.

Reno Postmaster Wilkins said his office cares about its customers.

"For example, if there's a mailbox that does less than 25 pieces of mail per day and can be removed, but that mailbox is outside a senior center, we'd probably let the box stand," he said.

"We are very aware of the need to provide good service."

Some postal patrons praised the city's post offices.

"I always get help at the (post office) windows and the people are very nice," said Janey McCarthy of Reno. "I think as a whole the service is poorly managed, but I have nothing against the individual postal workers.

"They do a great job and they could do an even better job if the bureaucracy would just get out of the way."



© Copyright Reno Gazette-Journal, a Gannett Co. Inc. Newspaper. Use of this site signifies agreement to our terms of service (updated 08/01/2001).



Dead letter-boxes

Post office yanks underused mail drops



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

These Front Street boxes are staying, but 31 collection boxes in Santa Cruz and Scotts Valley are being pulled out.

Collection hours shortened; watchdog decries cutbacks

By BRIAN SEALS

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Residents may want to get those last-minute bills, birthday cards and other mail into their neighborhood collection box earlier in the day — if they can find one.

The U.S. Postal Service earlier this month began changing collection times at mail boxes in and around the city.

The last pickup of the day was changed at 23 boxes from 5 p.m. to 3 p.m. At 11 other boxes, the last pickup was moved back an hour, from 6 p.m. to 5 p.m.

In addition, 31 boxes have been removed, or are slated for removal, dropping the total number of boxes in the Santa Cruz vicinity from 92 to

61. Most are in the immediate Santa Cruz area, with a handful near Scotts Valley.

Sarah Huffman summed up the feelings of many this week as she dropped mail into the collection boxes on Front Street — after the new 5 p.m. pickup.

"That sucks," she said after being told the collection time was now an hour earlier. "I work until 5 p.m."

Ann Hoppe of Scotts Valley was also none too pleased.

"That's the whole reason I dropped it off here," Hoppe said. "Most people get off work at 5 and try to mail by 6."

A Postal Service spokesman said the boxes were slated for after periodic "density" checks. Postal workers hit the streets to check how much

Please see **MAIL** on **BACK PAGE**

Collection contraction in S.C., S.V.

The U.S. Postal Service has removed, or will remove, 31 collection boxes in and around Santa Cruz, saying they get too little use.

Here are the locations:

- 555 Highway 17.
- 101 Felix St.
- 833 Water St.
- 1460 Graham Hill Road.
- 1080 Emeline Ave.
- 703 Laurent St.
- 214 California Ave.
- 434 Barson St.
- 470 River St.
- 1242 Bay St.
- 527 Seabright Ave.
- 1230 N. Branciforte Ave.
- 411 Cayuga St.
- 925 38th Ave.

- 2115 7th Ave.
- 1626 Seabright Ave.
- 2460 17th Ave.
- 301 McLaughlin Drive.
- 301 Heller Drive.
- 200 Heller Drive.
- 2006 Hagar Drive.
- 600 Kresge Court.
- 500 McLaughlin Drive.
- 200 McLaughlin Drive.
- 400 McLaughlin Drive.
- 150 Heller Drive.
- 6010 Winkle Ave.
- 630 Pacheco Ave.
- 552 Bean Creek Road.
- 253 Mount Hermon Drive.
- 1 Weston Drive.

Source:
U.S. Postal Service

Mail: Fewer boxes, earlier pickups

Continued from Page A1

mail is actually getting dropped in the bright blue boxes.

If a box does not receive an average of 25 pieces of mail per day in city areas, it can be removed, said Gus Ruiz, the service's spokesman for the region.

None of the 31 met that criteria, he said, adding that boxes are being pulled out all over the country.

The earlier pick-up times are meant to help the Postal Service get the mail sorted in a timely fashion, he said.

Mail trucks leave the main Santa Cruz post office at 4:15 p.m. and 7 p.m. for San Jose, where all mail from the region is sorted, Ruiz said.

"If we had the majority of the mail on that 7 p.m. truck, we would not be able to meet our next-day commitments," Ruiz said.

However, Santa Cruz resident Doug Carlson, a longtime Postal Service watchdog, said the changes — especially the earlier pickups — might be more than inconvenient; he said they could violate Postal Service policy.

That policy, he said, calls for boxes that receive an average of 100 pieces of mail per day to have a 5 p.m. or later pickup. He said some of the boxes that have a last pickup at 3 p.m. likely meet the 100-piece requirement.

Carlson also cited a memo from a high-ranking postal official stating collection times should be set as late in the day as possible.

Ruiz said he wasn't familiar with the pol-

icy, and officials in Washington, D.C., could not be reached Friday.

Ruiz said the service's policy that links management bonuses to meeting overnight delivery goals didn't factor into the decision.

Delivery targets are only one component of the bonuses, he said.

"We're not doing it with the intent of garnering more pay at the end of the year," Ruiz said. "It has everything to do with transportation."

But Carlson isn't sitting tight. He is writing the Postal Service asking the later collection times be restored, and that removal of some of the boxes be reconsidered.

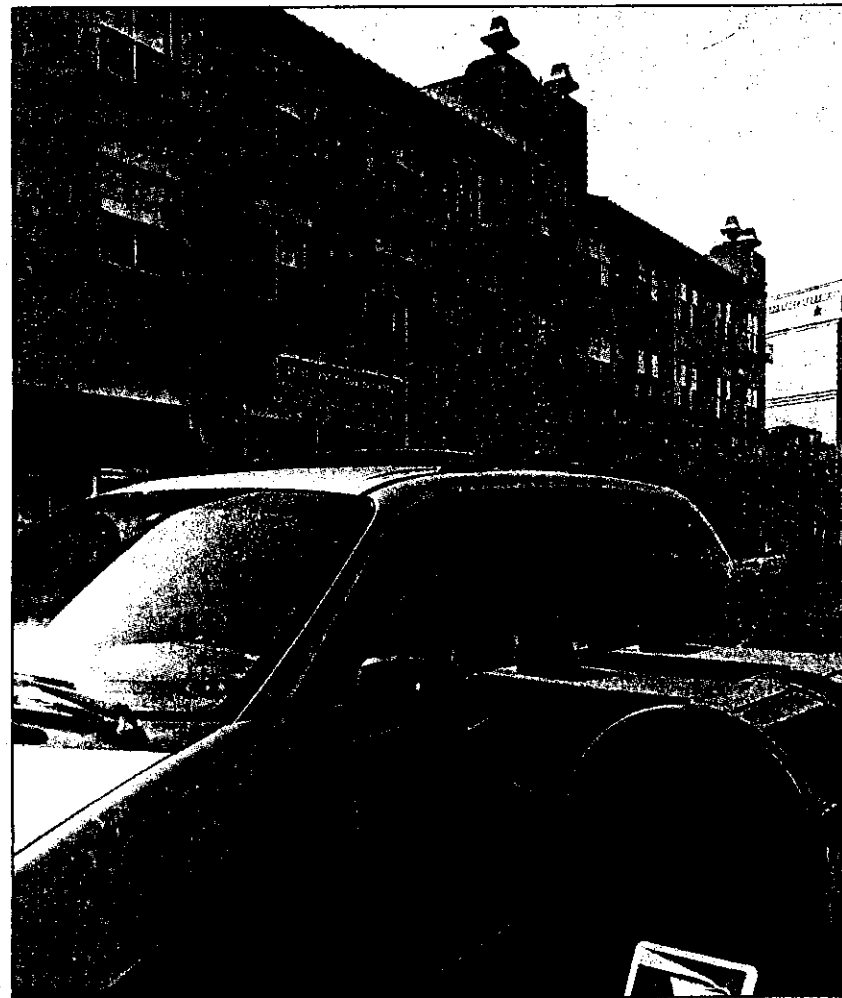
"Maybe they save some money with these changes, but what kind of service are we getting?" Carlson asked.

This is not the first time Carlson has criticized the Postal Service. In 1999, he was successful in getting 5 p.m. pickups restored at about 50 collection boxes in the Berkeley area. He also successfully prodded the Postal Service into restoring later pickups at 60 boxes near Walnut Creek.

A UC Berkeley-educated attorney, Carlson said he became interested in postal affairs in 1996 because of a proposal that would have charged nonresident post-office box holders more than residents. At the time, he had a post-office box in Berkeley but lived in Emeryville.

Carlson is now an assistant dean at UC Santa Cruz.

Contact Brian Seals at bseals@santa-cruz.com.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

These Front Street drop-boxes get plenty of business, but others that are used less either will be removed by the Postal Service, or already are gone.

USA TODAY

Home

News

Main Categories

[Top News](#)[Nation](#)[States](#)[Washington/Politics](#)[World](#)[Editorial/Opinion](#)[Health & Science](#)[Census](#)[Offbeat](#)[More News](#)[Columnists](#)[Lotteries](#)[City Guides](#)[Government Guide](#)[Talk Today](#)[Money](#)[Sports](#)[Life](#)[Tech](#)[Weather](#)

Search

Go

Site ☐ Web ☐

By LYCOS

ARCHIVES
 SEARCH FOR
 NEWSPAPER ARTICLES
[CLICK HERE](#)

NEW E-MAIL**GET NEWS
IN YOUR INBOX**

[Click here to
get the Daily
Briefing in your
inbox](#)

Nation

▪ [E-mail this story](#) ▪ [Subscribe to the newspaper](#) ▪ [Sign-up for e-mail news](#)

03/21/2002 - Updated 02:51 AM ET

Last pickup for the corner mailbox?

By Deborah Sharp, USA TODAY

Is the street-corner mailbox as endangered
as the 34-cent stamp?

Price check

[Stamp cost likely to
hit 37 cents](#)

The U.S. Postal Service has removed nearly 7,000 collection boxes in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the anthrax scare. But security issues only hastened a decline that was already underway.

Economic troubles and societal changes are threatening the future of the familiar blue boxes.

"We miss ours terribly," says Dawn Michelet, of Metairie, La. After 12 years of dropping mail into a box next to her bridal shop, she still finds herself carrying letters by habit to the now-empty spot. The box was removed last month.

Mailboxes in a handful of cities were removed because of heightened security after Sept. 11:

- New York lost 115, including boxes next to churches and mosques, at John F. Kennedy International Airport and near Mayor Michael Bloomberg's private home.
- Boise lost four boxes in front of the Idaho Capitol.
- Chicago officials asked the Postal Service to take about one-third of 185 street boxes in the downtown Loop.

But in Metairie, as in most cases, postal officials say, the boxes were culled because of a decline in use.

The Postal Service is expected to lose \$1.7 billion this year and has been looking for ways to cut costs. Boxes that receive fewer than 25 pieces of mail a day may be targeted for removal.

Friday, the Postal Rate Commission is expected to recommend raising the price of a first-class stamp from 34 cents to 37 cents.

Officials say demand for street boxes has dropped because of electronic bill-paying, curbside pickup in the suburbs and two-career spouses

JUST
NEW
star

dropping mail off at their offices. "Consumer behavior has changed," says Mark Saunders, a spokesman for the Postal Service.

The entry of anthrax into the nation's mail stream last fall and the deaths of five anthrax victims — including two postal workers — prompted some possible changes. Under consideration: chemical strips inside collection boxes to detect biohazards and interior bags to contain contaminants.

Since 1999, 20,726 collection boxes have been taken off the streets. The Postal Service has been eliminating about 2% of the boxes each year, but it is expected to double that amount this year. There are about 326,400 street boxes nationwide. They handle about one-fifth of the annual load of 207 billion pieces of mail.

Some decry the pace of removals. "Now would be the perfect time to try to get away with this. They can blame it on terrorism," says critic Rick Merritt of PostalWatch, a consumer group.

Others say the decrease in boxes is just one more evolutionary stage for the street-corner mailbox, which dates to the late 1850s.

Once pole-mounted, and briefly painted a controversial red, street boxes wore olive drab for nearly half of the past century — a tradition born of a vast surplus of World War I paint.

The color was last changed in 1970, and both the blue hue and boxy shape are copyrighted.

Even so, the lowly boxes get little respect. Vandalism is common, and pranksters deposit everything from puppies to suspicious powder.

Movies and music have romanticized mail carriers — *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; *Please, Mr. Postman* — but no one has memorialized the modern-day mailbox. It's even dissed at the National Postal Museum in Washington. Patrons clamor for the antique, pole-mounted version, but today's equivalent is not on display.

"The contemporary ones are too utilitarian to grab our love," museum curator Nancy Pope says.

In Metairie, Michelet would beg to differ. Throughout Louisiana, postal officials plan to remove about one in five collection boxes this year. "You don't know you're going to miss it until it's gone," Michelet says.



[Front Page](#) [News](#) [Money](#) [Sports](#) [Life](#) [Tech](#) [Weather](#) [Marketplace](#)
[USA TODAY Travel](#) [USA TODAY Job Center](#)

MARKETPLACE

Technology Journal: Covad prepares to woo investors again

Page B7.

Technology Journal: Microsoft asks judge to dismiss states' lawsuit

Page B8.

m's 'Dust Children' in Limbo

*As to Those
in Features,
Still Denied*

NECHT
STREET JOURNAL
TY, Vietnam—Any
sident who has
al features" and
en 1962 and 1976 is
migrant visa. So
o look like African-
who look more His-
ng in a filthy small
worst slums?

r American troops
r number of their
ne of the men have
re among Vietnam-
m carry rejection
late that state: "It
have the physical
of Amerasians."

dark-skinned men
says his mother told
name is Mark and
ation near an Amer-
of his African fea-
late has repeatedly
"I'm not Vietnam-
ver be happy here."

ming Act, enacted
abled 24,000 Amera-
family members to
ials at the U.S. con-
y many applicants
e other immigrant
ere intended to be
t restricted by dead-

nerasians appear to
bureaucratic limbo.
can consulate, who
consulate on condi-
ed, said the consu-
applications every
f "several hundred
een evaluated. The
begins—and fre-
t superficial of eval-
ant's face, the offi-
look like an Ameri-
ved, regardless of
upporting evidence.

It then be seen right
e day by two other
official. "And if ei-
applicant's appear-
that they're Amera-
into the program. So
s for anyone to be
1 and only one yes"
f thumb is that any
applicant," he said.
who appear so un-
ghter of a Vietnam-

assume that any government process is free of corruption. Many grew up as orphans, abandoned not only by their fathers but also by their mothers, who are often assumed by Vietnamese to have been prostitutes. Ridiculed for being "half breeds" or "children of dust," many have been denied access to schools. Those with African features are treated particularly badly because many Vietnamese hold people with dark skin in low regard.

al in Saigon, Emi
o comment for this
icials acknowledge



From top, clockwise: Pham Thi Anh Tuyet and her adoptive father; Tran Thi Du (left) and Tran Van Hai in front of the U.S. consulate with their rejection letters; a group of Amerasians sleeping near the fish market in Ho Chi Minh City; Nguyen Thanh Hien on his scooter in Ho Chi Minh City.

assume that any government process is free of corruption. Many grew up as orphans, abandoned not only by their fathers but also by their mothers, who are often assumed by Vietnamese to have been prostitutes. Ridiculed for being "half breeds" or "children of dust," many have been denied access to schools. Those with African features are treated particularly badly because many Vietnamese hold people with dark skin in low regard.

here in Ho Chi Minh City—Tran Van Hai, Nguyen Thanh An, Nguyen Van Thi, and Nguyen Thanh Hien—admit to working with traffickers. They say they first submitted legitimate applications, but were rejected. Then they let the middlemen create new applications, thinking that would give them a better chance.

They say the traffickers didn't offer to pay them, but convinced them that their acceptance by the consulate was guaranteed if they agreed to claim fake family members. After their false claims were discovered by the con-

Why Mailboxes Are Disappearing On Some Streets

By RICK BROOKS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Need to mail a letter? Don't be surprised if your next trip to the corner collection box leaves you wondering where it went.

Since Sept. 11, the U.S. Postal Service has removed about 6,800 of the familiar, blue boxes across the country. Many are at or near locations considered vulnerable to terrorism, such as airports, government buildings, skyscrapers, military bases, churches and schools.

The post office was already getting rid of some boxes because they weren't being used very much. Demand for collection boxes has been hurt in particular by

the growth of electronic bill payment. But the push to remove them is accelerating as the post office wrestles with how to keep the world's largest mail system safe in the wake of Sept. 11 and anthrax-related jitters.

"We've never found anything [dangerous] in a mailbox, but it is an obvious place where something could be put," says Larry Langford, a spokesman for Chicago's emergency-communications department. The city's mayoral office had 61 of 185 collection boxes in

downtown Chicago removed last month, all of which the post office says were suffering from dwindling use anyway.

The boxes removed nationwide since the terrorist attacks represent just 2% of the country's 330,000 mail-collection boxes, which receive as much as 20% of the Postal Service's daily load of 650 million pieces. The agency is on track to mothball nearly twice as many drop-off boxes in its current fiscal year as it did last year.

In New York City, the post office removed 78 collection boxes in Brooklyn and Queens that were near what the Postal Service calls "possible terrorist targets." Manhattan lost 37, including one close to the private residence of Mayor Michael Bloomberg. About a fifth of the 185 boxes in Arlington, Texas, were removed, partly to help free letter carriers and sorters to spend more time watching out for suspicious mail. And Roanoke, Va., has lost 60 of 343 boxes since Sept. 11.

Besides making cities feel safer, hauling away collection boxes could help the Postal Service cut costs at a time when it faces ballooning losses even without adding new mail-security procedures. It takes two to four minutes to unlock and empty the typical drop-off box, but letter carriers say some

Please Turn to Page B4

Bye-Bye Blue

The U.S. Postal Service is removing some blue mailboxes. Some facts:

Total boxes: 330,000

Removed since Sept.: 6,800

Removed last year: 8,980*

Target areas: Airports, gov't buildings, skyscrapers, military bases, churches

*FY ended Sept. 7
Source: USPS

Photographs by David J. McCarthy/Black Star

during the ed up more hina, deliv- w-ers. Audi- their favor-

Children' Seek American Visas

But cause the consulate said he had a non-American appearance. "Phat's mother says I'm the father," says Mr. Cobb, who had worked for a military contractor and who recently contacted the woman he had dated during the war. Mr. Cobb complains that consulate officials won't even meet with him due to a policy that only applicants are given appointments. "Phat was produced by America," he says, "and I would like him to be an American."

Participate in Cremation Process

But actor driving Asian, coun- ible crema- e a family cess—which button.

ectors often and full-ser- e casket can st, a simple ially aver- e price can e memorial

nderson-Mc- service cre- They market r, in part, by rs about cre- g room" that ace.

ly with what d about cre- ngtime part-

ports Profit, ctions Philip Morris's CEO Realizes \$44.3 Million From Stock Options

Block Inc.'s ie soared on nd mortgage parer again ns.

it income of hare, for the harply from hare, a year analysts sur- al/First Call ts a share.

amortization illion, or six year-earlier enue jumped million.

asting fiscal a share, with remaining at d boosted its \$2.25 a share

e company's an 18% jump while pretax ion from \$1.5

says in China, the prospect of breaking up too many couples would be seen as morally unacceptable.

The earlier success of "Walking into Shangri-La" gives him hope. The show's ratings, which measure the percentage of the viewing population watching a given show, ranged from a respectable 11% to a strong 17%, says Mr. Chen, adding that the show is already profitable.

Mr. Chen hopes to capitalize on the reality-TV trend before it goes stale, as it seems to have done in the U.S. "The life span of reality TV in China will only be two years," Mr. Chen predicts. In the meantime, he says, "costs are low and profits are high."

Why Some Mailboxes Are Getting the Boot

Continued From Page B1
get only a few pieces of mail a day.

"I used to wonder if I opened the box and it was empty every night why they made me go there," says John Rapp, the Postal Service's senior vice president of operations, who began as a letter carrier in 1961.

Postal guidelines set a minimum of 25 pieces a day for each box, though the rule can be bent if other boxes aren't within easy reach. The post office's Washington headquarters last month ordered local postmasters to inspect boxes across the country and "lay out plans for removing or plugging" those that aren't used enough, a spokesman says.

But scaling back at a time when the post office needs every letter it can get could backfire. Collection boxes, which cost \$320 each to produce and date back at least as far as 1858, are as familiar and convenient as public telephones. So ditching someone's favorite drop-off box won't make the Postal Service any more popular.

"I think they're overreacting," says Andy Fraser, a retiree in New Milford, N.J., who is still fuming about the disappearance of a box he used twice a week for 18 years.

At Boise Blue Art Supply Co. in Idaho, employees used to drop mail at the end of their day in collection boxes across the street from the nearby state Capitol. The boxes—among the busiest in Boise—were hauled away in November after state police decided they might be sitting ducks for terrorists. "We miss them," company Vice President Janet Hackett says of the mailboxes, "but we kind of understand."

The Postal Service agrees that the current push has its limits. "I don't see how removing a collection box protects anyone from anthrax," Mr. Rapp says. But it is probably the best the agency can do until it implements new protections for collection boxes, which could take months. Among the steps being considered: smaller slots to slide letters through, anthrax-detection strips and disposable bags to catch mail as it is dropped into boxes.

Collection boxes are easy targets. Thieves struck 380 boxes in the year ended Sept. 30, a 60% jump from a year earlier, according to the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. Others have been set on fire, fouled with graffiti and flattened by pickup trucks.

Thom Green, a letter carrier in Fort Wayne, Ind., says he has plucked puppies and purses out of collection boxes—even \$3,000 in cash that a business along his route mistakenly deposited in a clear bag. He notes: "Anytime you open a box, you have no idea what's in there."

John Sankus Jr., 28 years old, of Philadelphia, could spend as many as five years in prison for illegally reproducing and distributing hundreds of thousands of copies of copyrighted works around the world through the piracy group DrinkOrDie.

"This is a crime against the integrity of our electronic infrastructure," said U.S. Attorney Paul J. McNulty of Virginia. "It is imperative that we stop these techno-gangs from exploiting new technologies."

DrinkOrDie, which started in 1993 in Russia, was targeted by "Operation Buccaneer," a 15-month undercover crackdown by the U.S. Customs Service in which federal agents seized software and computers from universities, businesses and homes in 27 cities.

Investigators said DrinkOrDie members had their own public Web site and distributed items like the latest Windows software and digital copies of the film "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." They appeared to be motivated more by excitement than by profit, agents said.

The industry estimates that \$12 billion in pirated software is circulated each year. It isn't clear, however, that each person who obtains a bootleg copy would have been willing to pay for a legitimate one.

Federal officials alleged that Mr. Sankus managed the day-to-day operations of the group. He supervised about 60 people—from university students to executives of major Internet service providers—who acquired, "cracked" and distributed the pirated software, officials charged.

Mr. Sankus couldn't be reached for comment, and his attorney didn't return telephone calls.

Company insiders often provided the group with new software from their own companies days or weeks before it was released to the public. In one instance, a new version of Microsoft Corp.'s Windows was available in a pirated version two weeks before it went on sale to the public.

Federal agents executed more than 70 search warrants against targets of the investigation in December in the U.S., Australia, Norway, Sweden, Finland and the United Kingdom. The U.S. Attorney expects additional prosecutions as a result of the first phase of the operation.

Coach Inc. Fiscal Third-Quarter Results To Exceed Analyst Forecasts

Coach Inc. said it expects its fiscal third-quarter results to exceed analysts' projections, citing higher sales, gross margin expansion and tight expense control. The New York-based accessories retailer said it expects earnings of at least 27 cents a share in the period ending March 30, above analysts' estimates of 21 cents to 22 cents. For the fiscal year ending in June, Coach now expects earnings per share of \$1.83 on sales of at least \$695 million. A Thomson Financial/First Call survey of 12 analysts produced a full-year earnings estimate of \$1.73 a share. Coach plans to report its fiscal third-quarter results on April 23. In the year-earlier third quarter, Coach earned \$8 million, or 18 cents a share, on sales of \$130.6 million. In fiscal 2001, the company earned \$84 million, or \$1.52 a share, on sales of \$616.1 million. Coach shares jumped \$4.53, or 10%, to \$49.88 as of 4 p.m. in New York Stock Exchange composite trading yesterday.

Your corner mailbox may vanish someday



MY VIEW

By Judy Thompson

ANOTHER mailbox bit the dust. One day in January, the Alum Rock Village collection box, which had stood just outside the little produce store on the corner, was unbolted from its brackets and carried away to the U.S. Postal Service's graveyard for superfluous equipment. There it must have joined brother boxes, including the box that, until a few years ago, stood a half mile up Alum Rock Avenue in front of the California PEO home.

That was the box which the home's elderly lady residents used to visit to mail their lavender-scented letters to their loved ones far away. The proximity of the box gave the ladies an easy destination to walk to and a little extra purpose to their day.

There used to be a lot of mailboxes. Every neighborhood had one. People would walk to their corner mailbox and tuck in their outgoing mail (jiggling the lid briskly to make sure nothing got stuck, of course) and feel good about their little jaunt in the fresh air.

The mail truck would come to each neighborhood every day and the mailman would take the letters from the box to the post office. It was The American Way.

But now the Postal Service is removing thousands of mailboxes across the nation. The reason is partly concern about terrorism, and partly about costs and mail carriers' time

and dwindling use of some boxes.

I'm sure there used to be several collection boxes in my neighborhood near Alum Rock Park. But not today. With the PEO Home box gone, the closest mailbox is a two-mile walk or drive down the hill and, with the Alum Rock Village box gone, there are no longer any mailboxes on the north side of the street.

The lack of mailboxes may not sound like such a big deal and one might wonder why that whiny Mrs. Thompson — that would be me — doesn't just put her letters "out" and put up the red flag on her mailbox so the mailman will take her mail to the post office on his return trip.

Mrs. Thompson got good and burned doing almost exactly this! However, she was crafty enough *not* to hoist her mailbox flag so as to advertise that her mailbox was full of tantalizing stuff. Mail thieves are having their way with the mail belonging to folks naïve enough to put it out for the mailman to take — even if the red flag is never raised.

Twice last summer, thieves emptied Mrs. Thompson's mailbox of the outgoing mail. Each time the thieves stole the checks and altered them to suit their thievish needs. One check written to pay \$100 to Dr. Bench the dentist, was bleached out and changed to pay \$950 to "Ryan D. Davidson." The bank that cashed the check for "Ryan" was careful to have him ink his thumb print on the check — just in case he wasn't who he said he was — before they handed over the \$950. Ryan is still at large, inky thumb and all, no doubt blessing the Postal Service for removing the neighborhood mail-



MICHAEL OSBUN

boxes and providing easy pickings for knavish fellows like himself.

Back in ancient times when postage to mail a letter was 3 cents and postcards crossed the country for a penny, before the Post Office became the Postal "Service," somehow neighborhood mailboxes were provided and maintained and emptied at least daily, and the postal people didn't moan around about needing a few more cents per letter every whipstitch. But hey, don't let cranky Mrs. Thompson get started on that!

Judy Thompson is an East Side homemaker and community volunteer.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW? If you have special knowledge about something that's in the news, we'd like to consider your views for publication on our pages. "My View" columns may be submitted by e-mail to opinions@sjmercury.com, faxed to 408-271-3792 or mailed to Opinion Pages, My View, San Jose Mercury News, 750 Ridder Park Drive, San Jose, CA 95190. Columns should be no longer than 600 words. Please include your address and telephone number.